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RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 4208  
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [BL](#)  
SUBJECT: BOLIVIA: EVO RENEWS ATTACKS ON OPPOSITION LEADERS

Classified By: A/DCM Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 b,d

11. (C) The National Democratic Council (CONALDE, an association of opposition civic leaders and prefecture authorities) has announced that it will meet December 9 to form a defensive block in the face of ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) arrests of opposition leaders. The meeting is also intended to develop a strategy for a "No" campaign against the MAS draft constitution, which will go to referendum on January 25. The Bolivian government's decision to arrest opposition leaders has in some instances had an intimidating effect, encouraging other opposition leaders to keep their heads down or flee the country. However, the most recent arrests and threats of arrests seem to have sparked the opposition's fighting spirit, and a one-day civil strike December 3 in the opposition department (state) of Tarija was held to protest the government's arrests of opposition leaders. In response, the MAS organized a march of its supporters in Tarija, where opposition protesters and MAS campesinos met in the main plaza, exchanging insults but resulting in no violence.

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Kick 'Em When They're Down  
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12. (C) The regional opposition was seen by many as having lost influence after negotiations over the text of the draft constitution moved into Congress in October. Both the regional and national opposition are disorganized in the run-up to the January referendum on the draft constitution and the likely presidential election in 2009 (currently scheduled for December 2008, assuming the draft constitution passes.) The continuing incarceration of Pando's democratically-elected prefect, Leopoldo Fernando, the MAS appointment of a military leader to fill the prefectship, and the transition from a "state of siege" to a highly-militarized "normalcy" have intimidated many opposition leaders, who talk of sending their families out of the country and of maintaining a low profile.

13. (C) Not content to let beaten dogs lie, the ruling MAS

party has proceeded with strategic arrests and threats against opposition leaders in other departments. Government-associated news agency FIDES announced that opposition Tarija Prefect Mario Cossio and former-La Paz prefect Jose Luis "Pepe Lucho" Paredes have been accused of corruption and called to be present in court in Sucre. In addition, the government has made an official accusation of sedition against Santa Cruz civic committee president Branco Marinkovic.

¶4. (SBU) The government has arrested Tarija civic committee president Reynaldo Bayard for allegedly participating in an attempt to disrupt gas flow in a pipeline on September 10. Bayard has been quoted as saying that he feels used by the civic committee, which he said abandoned him when he most needed help. Bayard reportedly announced that he had intended to give himself up, but that he received instructions from opposition leadership to "flee." Verging on tears, Bayard also called on Tarija residents not/not to support the opposition-led strike, saying that he regretted participating in the opposition civic committee.

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Stirring the Ant Hill  
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¶5. (C) In response to these government arrests, which opposition contacts describe as provocation and persecution, the Tarija civic committee called for a one-day strike December 3. Vice President Garcia Linera warned against civic participation in the protest, describing it as a "cover-up for criminals" and suggesting that protesters "might even be complicit." The MAS also responded with action, calling for MAS-aligned protesters to descend upon the capital city of Tarija on December 3. In response to public fears of violent clashes, Tarija civic leader Freddy Castrillo gave reassurances: "A group of campesinos led by Luis Alfaro (a MAS social leader) intends to march to provoke the (opposition) institutions; we're not going to respond to the government's plan." In conversation with Emboff, Castrillo claimed that the Tarija strike was not a "pressure measure" but rather an effort to call national attention to human rights abuses and the arrests which he termed "kidnappings."

¶6. (SBU) Members of the regional opposition civic committee association CONALDE have called for a meeting of the organization on December 9. "This is a rebirth of CONALDE, because after the severe blow that we felt when they (the government) kidnapped Pando governor Leopoldo Fernandez, now the movement is growing stronger again," declared Beni civic committee president Alberto Melgar. Nevertheless, Government Minister Alfredo Rada called CONALDE a "council of criminals" and MAS Senator Felix Rojas elaborated that, "The National Council of Criminals will end in a cell. That's the destiny that awaits them and there, surely, they will meet, they will lick their wounds among lepers, traitors, and separatists."

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Comment  
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¶7. (C) In disarray since the September face-off with MAS supporters in Santa Cruz, the regional opposition may be gaining strength from a sense of persecution, although MAS pressure is also revealing more cracks in the opposition, as opposition leaders criticize the weak response to previous arrests. The MAS may have hoped to decapitate the hydra with targeted arrests in keeping with its confrontational style, but instead may have re-invigorated the regional opposition (CONALDE). In Bolivia, political protests are generally minimal or nonexistent in the weeks between Christmas (December 25) and Carnival (February 22). In the run up to the January 25 constitutional referendum, the opposition will have difficulty mobilizing its supporters due to a sense of foregone defeat and the seasonal doldrums. Whether the MAS arrest campaign eventually fires up the opposition or snuffs it out, the opposition intends to use the MAS "persecution"

as a rallying call for their troops in the upcoming push for  
a "No" vote against the MAS constitution. End comment.  
LAMBERT